

**THE ECCLESIAZUSAE**  
**(392 B.C.)**

**BACKGROUND:** "Women Attending the Athenian Assembly" was produced in 392 B.C., following a thirteen-year gap in our knowledge of Aristophanes' literary work. It is certain that he wrote during those years, but what and how much his output was we do not know. Also during that period, Athens lost the Peloponnesian War with Sparta, underwent a reign of terror under the Thirty similar to that following the French Revolution, and had democracy restored by Thrasybulus. In 399 Socrates was tried and executed, and there was a war with Corinth between 395 and 387. The "Golden Age" of Athens was certainly over, and within half a century the empire of Alexander would begin.

**CHARACTERS:**

**PRAXAGORA** The leader of the women's revolution.

**BLEPYRUS** Praxagora's husband.

**WOMEN**

**A MAN**

**CHREMES** "Coughing" or "snorting," a citizen.

**A CITIZEN**

**HERALD**

**A GIRL**

**A YOUNG MAN**

**THREE OLD WOMEN** Ugly prostitutes.

**PRAXAGORA'S MAIDSERVANT**

**CHORUS OF WOMEN**

**PROLOGUE:** Praxagora enters with a lantern to signal the Athenian women to begin their plot. Women begin to come in, dressed as men, in order to sit in the Assembly place. The women, moreover, have let the hair under their arms grow and have obtained beards. If a fairy could fool everyone into thinking himself a man, they should have no trouble. They rehearse their speeches, but they use so many womanly expressions that Praxagora delivers a mock oration, in which she pro-

poses that the rule of Athens be turned over to the women. "Let us simply hand them the power, remembering that they are mothers and will therefore spare the blood of our soldiers; besides, who will know better than a mother how to forward provisions to the front? Woman is adept at getting money for herself and will not easily let herself be deceived; she understands deceit too well herself." The women make final adjustments in their costumes and go to the Pnyx.

**COMMENT:** Praxagora's oration points out the vagaries of Athenian politics, the class struggles, and the people's loss of spirit in a depressing and changing period.

**PARODOS:** The Chorus of Women moves toward the Pnyx, recalling the early days of the Assembly when citizens served for nothing. Now the citizen is as mercenary as the stonemason.

**PROAGON:** Blepyrus appears in front of his house wearing his wife's clothes. He has to go to the bathroom, and the only clothes he could find in the house are his wife's. As he squats in the alleyway, a neighbor looks out the window and talks with him. He, too, cannot find his clothes. After some comments on his constipation, Blepyrus is discovered by Chremes, who has come from the Assembly. Chremes tells him that there was a large crowd there, "and the folk looked pale and wan, like so many shoemakers." These pale shoemakers, moreover, outnumbered everyone else and voted that the women take over the city. The speaker pointed out that men are untrustworthy and blabbermouths, but women are not informers, they do not bring lawsuits, and they do not hatch conspiracies. Thus, men and women will exchange places. Blepyrus fears that the women may force them to love-making, and compulsion takes all the fun out of it.

**PARODOS II:** The Chorus of Women marches back onstage. They make sure that no men are around and then remove their disguises.

**AGON:** Blepyrus comes out of his house and asks Praxagora

where she has been. And why did she take his clothes? She replies that she had to go help a friend, but he says that she could have at least told him. He asks her if she has heard what the Assembly voted. Praxagora feigns ignorance, and Blepyrus informs her that the women rule over all public business. Praxagora is happy, for now there will be no more evil deeds and crimes. She believes her ideas are good, but fears "that the public will cling to the old customs and refuse to accept my reforms." Chremes tells her to have no fear: "love of novelty and disdain for traditions, these are the dominating principles among us."

**COMMENT:** Instead of convincing and changing Blepyrus, this scene points out the change in Chremes, who now favors the new government.

**PARABASIS:** Praxagora addresses the audience, explaining her plan: all property will be in common and all will have a share of everything. There will be one and the same condition of life for all.

**COMMENT:** In the fourth century Middle Comedy, the role of the Chorus declined, as indicated in the parabasis. It is the main character, not the Chorus, who speaks to the audience. Also noticeable in Aristophanes are the loss of boldness in his diction and the loss of attacks on statesmen in the speeches.

**EPISODE I:** Praxagora is interrupted by her husband, but she continues her explanation: all money, land, and private property will be common to all. Not only that, women shall belong to all men in common, and each shall beget children by any man that wishes to have her. The ugliest, furthermore, must be chosen or choose before the handsome men or pretty women choose. Violent beatings of old men will be stopped, Praxagora explains, because children will think the old men might be their fathers. Slaves will till the soil, and the men will only have to lie around the house. Thievery will vanish for everyone will have a common share. The law courts will be turned into din-

ing halls, and "Athens will become nothing more than a single house." The women will also abolish the whores, so that they can have the first-fruits of the young men. "It is not proper that tricked-out slaves should rob free-born women of their pleasures. Let the courtesans be free to sleep with the slaves." Blepyrus follows Praxagora into the house, and Chremes goes to collect his goods.

**STASIMON I:** The Chorus does not sing an ode, but dances.

**EPISODE II:** Chremes brings his property on stage in preparation for redistribution. A Citizen, who is planning on first seeing which way things turn, mocks Chremes for obeying the new law. It is nonsensical and non-Athenian to give up goods. The Citizen is skeptical; he doesn't believe many will follow the new edict.

A Woman Herald summons everyone to the banquet. Chremes goes, but the Citizen plans to sneak into the banquet without having turned in his property.

**STASIMON II:** There is another interlude of dancing by the Chorus.

**EPISODE III:** At the houses of two prostitutes, an old whore and a young one argue. The old woman claims that she will get the lovers first, the young one argues that the only people who come to the old woman's house will be to carry her corpse out. A young man wants to enter the house of the young prostitute when the old one claims him under the new law. He is rescued by the young prostitute, but another old woman enters to claim him. A third and uglier hag appears to upset the claim, and the two women fight over him. They finally drag him off between them.

**STASIMON III:** Again there is no sung stasimon but a dance performed by the Chorus.

**EXODOS:** Praxagora's maid servant comments on how happy

everyone is now. She stops Blepyrus on his way to dine and tells him that his mistress has bidden her to take him and some young girls to the banquet. "Some Chian wine is left and lots of other goods things. Therefore hurry, and invite likewise all the spectators whom we have pleased, and such of the judges as are not against us, to follow us; we will offer them everything they desire." The Chorus concludes the comedy with a reminder for the judges to award the play the prize, and for the audience to remember his comedy although it is to be played before the competitors' comedies. Then the Chorus follows Blepyrus and the maidservant out to the feast.

**COMMENT:** There is a tone of weariness observable in the play that is characteristic of periods after a "golden age" has left. It is a desire for rest and release from the labors of a life and a time that are no longer secure and convinced of life's meaning. All energy has gone; all that is left is the dragging out of existence. This tone is also noticeable in the late Golden Age of Latin literature and the late sixteenth century after the Renaissance.